

The GDST Difference: Designing education for girls' futures



GDST
GIRLS' DAY SCHOOL TRUST

Introduction



At the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST), we are united in a mission to help girls learn without limits, so that they can lead lives without limits.

The proof of a great education is what happens in girls' futures: the professions and industries they choose, the journeys they take in their careers, the qualities they are valued for and, of course, the people they become.

To mark the GDST's 150th anniversary, we commissioned a landmark piece of research, the *Girls' Futures Report*, to find out what girls and young women feel about the future: their ambitions, their priorities, and the challenges they face. Working with a specialist research agency, YouthSight, we surveyed over 5000

young people between the ages of 9 and 18 including a nationally representative sample of girls from non-GDST schools, girls from GDST schools and boys at the ages of 9, 14 and 18. We also carried out in-depth interviews and focus groups with young people and consulted experts in educational psychology, careers and equality.

The *Girls' Futures* research found that girls from non-GDST schools across England and Wales experience a fall in confidence between the ages of 14 and 18. The doubts they feel and the challenges they experience limit their expectations of the world of work and how prepared they feel to tackle life after school, as well as their confidence in taking risks and in challenging gender stereotypes.



On the other hand, the *Girls' Futures* research showed that girls from GDST schools have greater confidence that they can achieve their goals and have greater belief in their schools' ability to prepare them for the future than girls attending non-GDST schools. We believe this demonstrates the GDST difference.

Our experience as experts in girls' education has shown us that it fosters higher academic achievement, greater diversity of subject choice, stronger self-confidence and resilience, and enhanced career progression. GDST schools are designed around collaborative classrooms, curriculum that give girls the freedom to explore, and strong positive role models who shape inclusive cultures.

“A GDST education is designed so that girls can thrive in classrooms, knitted together with golden threads of diversity and inclusion, sustainability and wellbeing, so that they go on to flourish in the wider world. Key to this is the GDST difference: schools dedicated to developing confident, courageous, creative and resilient young women.”



EXPLORE THE NATIONAL GDST GIRLS' FUTURES REPORT

Designing schools for girls

There is strong evidence that girls-only education leads to higher academic achievement, greater diversity of subject choice, stronger self-confidence and resilience, and enhanced career progression.

In mixed-sex schools, girls often adopt roles that reflect others' views of them, and which tend to narrow their academic and non-academic choices. Girls at GDST schools are empowered to reject gender stereotyping: for example in sports, the subjects they take and future career choices.

In single-sex schools, a higher proportion of girls choose to continue with what can

be seen as 'masculine' subjects – like maths, physics and engineering.

In a GDST survey of junior school pupils (from nursery and reception to Year 6), one in five told us that maths is their favourite subject. In 2021, more than 47% of GDST students took at least one science subject, and 39% took maths at A Level.

In later years, we encourage girls to explore the boundless opportunities in STEM through initiatives like our pioneering Space Technology Diploma, supported by NASA, which teaches girls to code for cutting edge space science.



“It is significant that girls in the national survey were much less convinced than boys that their schools provide equal opportunities. Gender equality cannot be assumed as a given in mixed-sex schools.”

– Dr Kevin Stannard, Director of Innovation and Learning at GDST

“At the GDST we take pride in instilling a love of learning maths from a young age. Maths at a GDST school is fun. The students get to build virtual race cars, create and budget for virtual gardens or manage troop deployment during the Second World War – all in the name of maths.”

– Rebecca Brown, GDST Trust Consultant
Teacher for Mathematics

GDST schools are girls' schools by design: founded on the belief that success is best achieved by educating girls separately in distinctive, girl-friendly environments built around three principles:

Classrooms that are characterised by collaboration and discussion-led learning, in environments that encourage girls to try new and different things, with the freedom to fail without the fear of embarrassment.

Curriculum that give girls the freedom to explore subject choices that suit them as individuals, not expectations of their gender; encouraging them to take part in a wide range of sport and opening up a broad range

of co-curricular activities to create individual voyages of discovery, and feed curious minds.

Building a whole-school **culture** where girls see strong and positive role models and where they have the opportunity to try out leadership roles throughout their school career, as well as build a strong sense of their own identity and confidence in taking risks.

GDST schools also allow teachers and schools to focus more effectively on the needs of individual girls, enabling them to achieve more when they are given their own dedicated space to develop, free of gender stereotyping and distraction.

GDST schools and girls' confidence

If a school is aimed at preparing children for the future, then what we see at GDST schools are young women who, by 18, feel more inspired, confident and real-world ready than their peers in other schools across the country.

Compared to their peers in non-GDST (and mainly mixed-sex) schools, GDST girls report that they feel more confident, less restricted by gender stereotypes, happier to take on leadership positions and more comfortable taking risks, than girls elsewhere. Trends in confidence, positivity and ambition in students at GDST schools are also closer to those of a representative sample of boys in the UK than other girls across the country: from knowing what job they want, to feeling prepared for the future.



We found that across age groups, 66% of GDST girls agree they are comfortable taking risks compared to 52% of non-GDST girls. Girls in GDST junior schools have strong self-confidence: only 5% of GDST girls feel negatively about the future compared to 20% of boys and 35% of non-GDST girls aged 9. And only 6% of GDST girls aged 9 say they avoid some activities because of their gender, compared to 37% of 9 year old girls and 31% of boys in the national samples. Though confidence does dip in the middle secondary years, GDST girls have built a reservoir of resilience, and self-belief grows through the sixth form, in contrast to their peers – largely in mixed schools – whose confidence continues to fall.

Our experience and research shows that it is wrong to assume that, because girls do not mix with boys in a school environment, that they will struggle to do so in the wider world. In fact, girls are given the freedom and facilities to gain a deeply seated confidence in girls-only schools. They are not held back by gender stereotypes or the pressures of conformity that are felt in mixed-sex classrooms. The confidence gained in a girls-only environment – through trying out leadership roles, working collaboratively and innovating with the freedom to fail – is taken into the wider world and applied to social interactions.

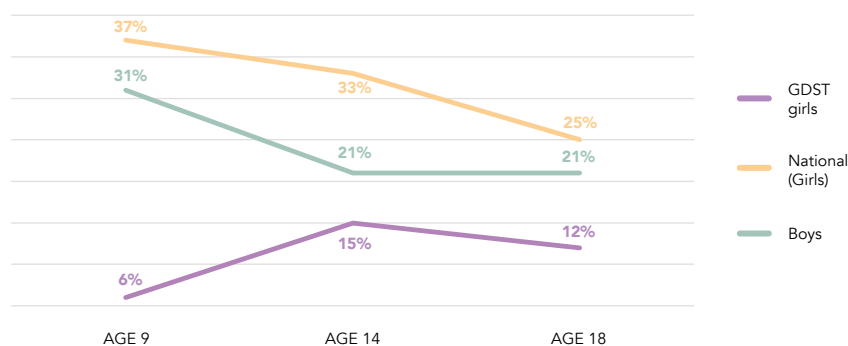
“Our research shows that in classrooms without boys, girls feel more free to pursue a wider range of subjects, to participate more actively in lessons, challenge others’ views, take leadership roles and work collaboratively.”

EXPLORE OUR RESEARCH:



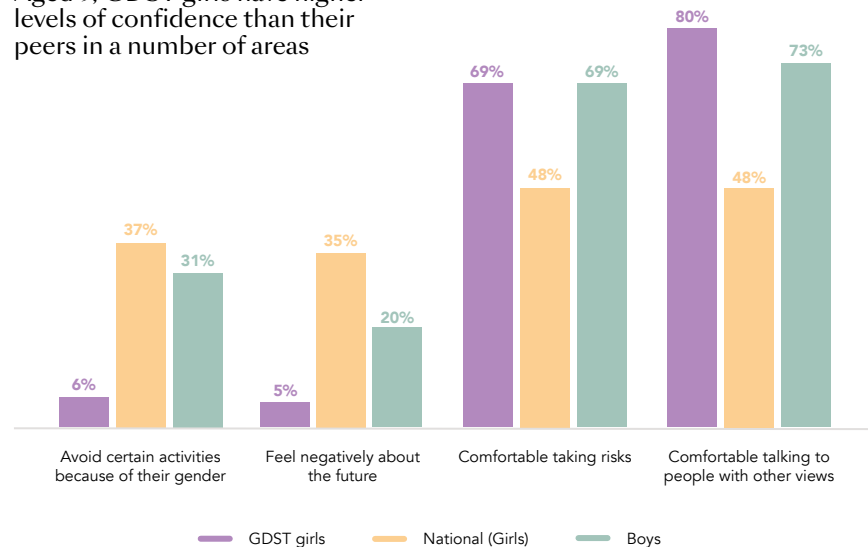
WHY (AND HOW) GIRLS THRIVE IN GIRLS-ONLY SCHOOLS

% who avoid certain activities because of their gender



The junior school effect

Aged 9, GDST girls have higher levels of confidence than their peers in a number of areas



The foundations for a bright future are built in early years education. For girls, our research demonstrates the benefits of a GDST junior school.

A child's worldview and social skills are shaped at a young age. GDST junior school girls are almost 20% more likely than their non-GDST peers to believe that women's equality is an important issue. They're also far more likely than girls at mixed-sex and non-GDST schools to think that school prepares them to work well in a team.

Multiple findings show that GDST junior school girls are significantly more confident and resilient than their non-GDST peers; for example, GDST girls at age 9 are as confident as boys when it comes to taking risks, both at 69%, compared to less than half of non-GDST girls. They are also more comfortable talking to people with different views to their own at 80%, above boys at 73% and significantly higher than non-GDST girls at 48%.



“Being a school ambassador has prepared me for the outside world. I can talk about a range of issues with people who are in my peer group and discuss challenges that might be facing them. I can empathise with other people while being able to act in a leadership role for them. All that has made me a confident person.”

– GDST sixth former

GDST junior school pupils are more likely than their non-GDST peers to say school prepares them to:

- Communicate well with others
- Understand people who are different to them
- Understand what is happening in the world
- Feel prepared to make a difference in the world
- Be creative
- Manage money
- Make decisions by themselves
- Know how to look after themselves

Success at sixth form



Confidence is key to the sixth form years. Our comparative research of GDST girls and their counterparts from mixed-sex schools found that GDST sixth formers are less likely to feel negative about the future and more likely to feel positive.

Even within our GDST environment, the difference a well-designed, girls-only education can make to confidence in these critical years is notable. GDST sixth formers see an increase in confidence in the following areas, during Years 12 and 13:

- Speaking to someone with different views
- Asking questions about topics that are difficult to talk about
- Having confidence in their own decisions, even if others disagree

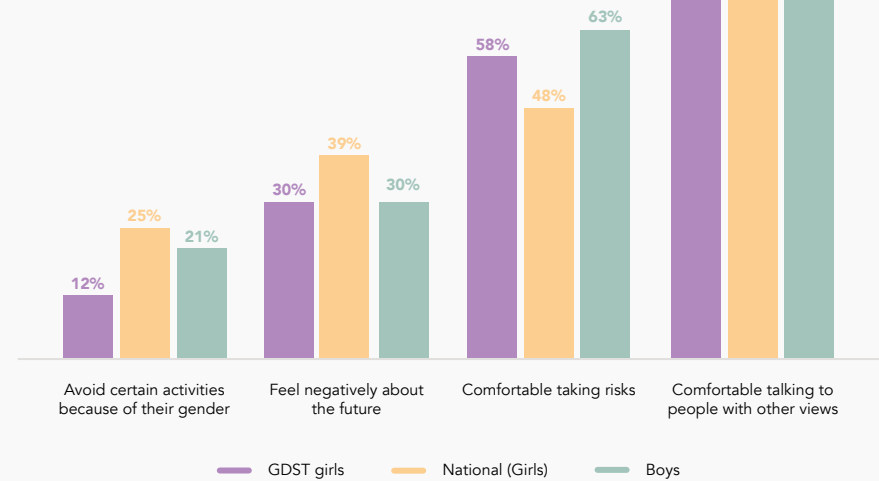
For non-GDST students, our research found a drop in confidence in sixth form for the same measures.

GDST sixth formers are more likely to feel prepared for the future than their non-GDST counterparts in mixed-sex schools. Our sixth form students are more likely than their non-GDST counterparts to want to do a job they enjoy, have a job that pays well and be their own boss.

“I have never personally thought that I couldn't pursue a certain subject because of my gender, not once. I don't even vaguely think that.”

– GDST sixth former

Aged 18, GDST girls have higher levels of confidence than their peers in a number of areas



The right role models

The right role models are essential in shaping girls' ambitions and goals for the future. Children's expectations are formed early, by how people they identify with fit into the wider world – whether that is in fiction or reality.

We are proud of the role models and strong school leaders found in our student community. Many of our schools have developed 'Big Sister' programmes – buddy systems for younger pupils to be supported by older girls, who are provided with essential training, including an understanding of safeguarding issues.

At Norwich High School for Girls, 40% of Year 7 girls in 2020-21 were regularly taking

part in the scheme and, when asked in a recent survey what the best thing about senior school is, the highest response was 'having a Big Sister'.

Our bursary, outreach and partnerships work shapes the role models of the future. The bursary scheme is designed to help girls from all backgrounds to access a GDST education, supporting hundreds of girls every year to give them access to first-class schools and to change the course of their lives.

'Once a GDST girl, always a GDST girl' is a motto we live by. Our alumnae community connects with our sixth formers through the GDST Rungway scheme, to offer advice, expertise and mentorship on careers, post-school life and more.



"I've never based what I want to do on what other people around me perceive I could do, but what I know I can."

– GDST sixth former



"My role model is probably my English teacher. She has helped me grow my confidence and provided an example of a woman who is both intelligent and funny, who acts with consideration for others without side-lining herself."

– GDST sixth former

The GDST Student Survey, carried out in 2018, found that teachers were central to inspiring girls as much through their personal qualities as their teaching practices. Girls told us they most admire teachers for their approachability, mutual respect, passion and their ability to explain subjects well.

It is because of these great people at the heart of our schools, who work with empathy and dedication, that we are able to deliver not only a first-class education, but produce the leaders, creators and thinkers of the future, young women with strong character and strong values. We are always looking for ways to inspire girls outside of the classroom and our groundbreaking programmes are an important part of that.



**MEET OUR
INSPIRATIONAL
TEACHING
COMMUNITY**

The GDST difference

At the GDST, academic excellence and intellectual curiosity are fundamental. In our schools, a family of brilliant diverse professionals and students from across the UK, girls learn without limits. We focus on helping our girls develop the skills and character to prepare them for the future, with confidence beyond the curriculum.

The GDST has golden threads that run through our curriculum, co-curriculum and pastoral care, and extend to every single thing we do as an organisation.



Diversity & Inclusion

We believe it is our duty to embed diversity and inclusion at the heart of our schools and to make sure all our students feel supported. Our *Undivided* programme sees girls working alongside staff, management and diversity experts to make sure that every voice is heard and equally valued at the GDST.

Sustainability

The climate crisis is a very real part of our lives today and will be felt more keenly when our students reach adulthood. Our girls are dedicated to achieving a sustainable world and the GDST is committed to meeting critically important sustainability targets at every level of the organisation: from our infrastructure and purchasing decisions, through to a dynamic green thread woven into every aspect of our curriculum.



Wellbeing

Without doubt, young people today feel pressures of high attainment and social belonging. Prioritising good mental health and wellbeing lies at the heart of the development of every young person at a GDST school. We are constantly evolving the way we support our girls' mental health: drawing on the most up-to-date expertise, fostered in an environment of nurture and understanding that empowers students to have confidence and pride in who they are.



Growing up in a changing world

Alongside this, our schools prepare our students to deal with the complex pressures of modern society. From financial education to the GDST CareerStart programme and our pioneering LEAD diploma, as well as bespoke programmes in each school, we work to build civil discourse skills, develop self-identity and build academic, practical and social skills for the world of tomorrow.

Find out more

These are exciting times for girls.

As a family of 25 schools, including two academies, we tailor our approach to how girls learn best, providing them with the attributes they need to excel.

In our schools, academic excellence is a given. But GDST girls also learn to be confident, happy, fearless and prepared for the opportunities of the future.



FIND YOUR
LOCAL GDST
SCHOOL AT
GDST.NET

About GDST

The Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) is a family of 25 independent schools and academies across the UK, with 4,000 staff educating 20,000 girls from ages three to 18. We pride ourselves on the excellent academic and pastoral provision on offer in our schools; GDST girls are supported to be happy, confident and fearless. We tailor our approach to how girls learn best, providing them with the attributes they need to excel.

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